

Peter Denman

Gael Force

Graph, Third series, Issue 3,1, Spring 1998, edited by Peter Sirr and Barra Ó Séaghdha.

Force 10, Issue 9, edited by Molly McCloskey.

Flaming Arrows, Issue 6, edited by Leo O'Regan.

Metre, No. 3, Autumn 1997, edited by Justin Quinn and David Wheatley.

The Stinging Fly, edited by Aoife Kavanagh and Declan Meade.

InCognito, Volume 3, Spring 1998, edited by Christopher O'Rourke.

With its A4 size pages and scissors-and-paste layout look, the first series of *Graph* was a lively commentary on arts and culture in Ireland. It ceased and then re-emerged as a squat octavo under the imprint of Cork University Press. And in that second series of *Graph* there was a sense of the original editorial concept failing to hold its own against a university press looking for something akin to an academic journal. *Graph* (Second Series) did not last long. Now we have *Graph* again, well into its third series, and the news is good. Back to the thin A4 format, but with a glossier feel and a tidier lay out. It adheres to its original policy of not publishing poems, but gives a lively attention to contemporary writing. In this issue there is a review of some new American poetry, a piece by Grace Paley, and an interview with Tomas MacSiomóin, among other things. Barra Ó Séaghdha's "Jump Cuts" is a regular commentary on issues, often astringent. His paragraphs here on the politics of Paul Durcan, and Durcan's emulation of Francis Stuart in "the abjection stakes", raise questions that go beyond the recent journalistic tizzy about Stuart and Aodána.

Ó Séaghdha's comments are prompted largely by Durcan's poem in the *Sunday Independent* immediately following the killing of two RUC constables in Lurgan in June 1997. That poem by Durcan is included in *Force 10*, the Sligo-based journal now in its ninth issue. Leaving aside the politics of the poem, its appearance in *Force 10* raises some editorial questions. Literary magazines are for new writing. How appropriate is it for one to carry work already published on the front page of a mass circulation newspaper? Is this an attempt to have it both ways — poetry as instant public pronouncement (and there is no doubt but that the immediacy of Durcan's poem was powerfully effective) now reclaiming a place

in the margins of reflective response which are its more usual haunts? Also in *Force 10* is an interesting piece by Edmund White — actually the text of his replies in an interview with Molly McCluskey, but with the questions edited out. This gives it the feel of one of those “in conversation with” articles that footballers contribute to the sports pages. What White has to say is interesting — “Charm is an important element in writing, especially if you are dealing with transgressive material” — but the questions would have contextualised his remarks all the more. A similarly questionless interview with Francis Harvey reads better, perhaps because it is interspersed with some of his poems. Harvey’s is an unfashionable and quiet voice, a latter-day metaphysical who merits a hearing. There are poems by Medbh McGuckian, Leland Bardwell and Eamon Grennan, a couple of translations by Seamus Heaney and a pair of poems by Dermot Healy. Also lots of photographs, and some fiction.

Another from Sligo is *Flaming Arrows*, now in its sixth issue. Where *Force 10* is a large, respectable, coffee-table sort of periodical, *Flaming Arrows* is a proper little magazine. Just a lot of unadorned poems, followed by some stories and prose pieces. Most of the names are new to me, and here again there are no notes on contributors. It is a pity that it generally only gives one poem by each contributor. When a new voice seems interesting, it is helpful to have two or three poems together to give a sense of the poet’s characteristics and possibilities. The quality of the poetry here is uneven, however, and in the case of some of those new names one poem is quite enough. The only multiple contributor here is Sydney Bernard Smith, with a short story and two poems — a Jungian verse-digest and a good old-fashioned verse-rant against artistic pretension.

A few years ago, in an editorial for this journal (*Poetry Ireland Review* 35) I mused inconsequentially on the interplay of poetry and cars. Now here comes *Metre* with a full-length essay by Medbh McGuckian on the car in Heaney’s poetry. McGuckian’s essay is solemnly flagged as “important” on the cover of *Metre* (very much in keeping with *Metre*’s overall seriousness of tone) and I started the essay with slightly raised eyebrows. But I returned them to their normal setting. In fact, the essay is fascinating as one poet’s exploration of another’s work. I came away with added insight into Heaney’s poetry, and an incentive to return to McGuckian’s own. The cars are immaterial.

Metre is squarely a poetry magazine: poems, comments by poets, reviews

of poetry, articles about poetry and poets. This issue has a theme, "Irish Poetry and the Diaspora", which is catered for by invited contributions from thirteen poets who offer a few paragraphs of comment apiece. These tend to be more autobiographical and anecdotal than illuminating or definitive. Scrabbling through all of this for a thread, the introduction comes up with the pronouncement that "one common idea emerges: childhood. That a poet grows up in a certain region and learns the use of English first in that place would seem to be a crucial factor in securing a sense of national identity". H'm. There are more questions than answers buried in that little hill of beans — and some missed opportunities too. It is a pity we could not have had Louis de Paor's comments on being an Irish poet in Melbourne. And Cathal Ó Searcaigh's on being a gay (and yes, Irish) poet in London. Or, even if we are already familiar with much of it, what about Nuala Ní Dhorghnaill's mythical use of her translations between Lancashire, galltacht, and gaeltacht? For these poets, just how crucial in securing a sense of national identity was their learning the use of English — wherever?

Once past the theme feature, the poems themselves are generally good, among them two strong ones by Thomas Kinsella, three Hartnett translations from Ó Rathaille and Ó Súilleabháin, and a solid showing by the three Peters — Fallon, McDonald, and Sirr. Eamon Grennan has some nice thirteen liners. (A small poetico-anatomical point: perhaps "tibia" would be better than "fibula" in the penultimate line of "Amputation", given the reference to a "flute" at the moment of closure?)

The Stinging Fly is very much an entry-level periodical. There are some contributors (Áine Miller and Michael Wynne for instance) with previous publication, but most of the names are new to me. Therefore it's a pity that the material is presented so baldly. There is no editorial, even though this its first issue. I presume this is the first issue, for there is no date or issue number. And there are no notes on contributors. I would have liked to know more about Melissa Demian, whose poem "The Drum Lesson" is remarkably assured.

InCognito is an attractive magazine, with a good range and quality of material, but it has not worked out how best to cut its cloth. Its editorial tells us that henceforth it will concentrate on poetry "because there is a phenomenal amount of it being written", and will drop fiction, because so much of that is being written. I don't quite follow the reasoning here,

although I note the promise of another publication from the same stable to cater for fiction. There are interviews with Eithne Strong and Desmond O'Grady, and Tony Curtis gets a good outing with five poems.

A number of poets crop up several times in these magazines: Heaney and Grennan in *Metre* and *Force 10*, Sirr and Mark Roper in *Metre* and *Incognito*, Celia De Fréine in *Flaming Arrows* and *Incognito*, Howard Wright in *Incognito* and *Force 10*. David Wheatley and Justin Quinn, editors of *Metre*, contribute prose pieces to *Graph*. Among the poets using the magazines to establish a presence, I noticed in particular Tom French, with poems in *Force 10* and *Metre*. Of his three in *Metre*, one is a parody of Michael Longley which has not really caught Longley's scrupulous trust in language, but it was worth trying. Another has verbal and erotic echoes of Montague's 'All Legendary Obstacles'. His 'Timepieces' in *Force 10* works well. I will be on the lookout for more from him. Meanwhile, I'll put these periodicals away, to be thumbed through again in, say, ten years time to see who's in and who's up.